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Windows of understanding: Broadening access to knowledge production through participatory action research

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Abstract

This article presents a participatory research project involving immigrant organizations and professional parenting support services in Amsterdam, Netherlands. The project combined local development aims with co-generative knowledge and mutual learning to produce socially and scientifically relevant knowledge. By using participatory components as ‘windows of understanding’ in a broader non-participatory research, previously excluded perspectives were included in knowledge production, while also producing local change. An analysis of the challenges and positive outcomes offers a methodological reflection that can contribute to future developments in participatory action research (PAR).

Introduction

This article presents and analyses a participatory investigation of a cooperative effort between two immigrant organizations and a municipal Youth and Family Centre (YFC) in Amsterdam, Netherlands, which was part of a broader study on cooperation between immigrant organizations and state services for parenting support. The project sought to combine the developmental aims of participatory action research (PAR), which are its strength, with contributions to the growth of (supra-local) knowledge. Though the latter is valued by many advocates of PAR, in practice the development of knowledge often becomes overshadowed by the goal of local change. In contrast, research methodologies, such as interactive research (Svensson et al., 2007), that employ the active involvement of participants in the design and performance of innovative research, tend to disregard the local change produced through PAR. This project pursued both aims. The challenge of combining a local (developmental) and a supra-local (research) focus was met by embedding the PAR in a mainstream research project, for which it functioned as a ‘window of understanding’. This methodological strategy involved a continuous interaction between the local analysis, performed together with participants, regarding their own situations, and the broader analysis of extended empirical data from a study for which the PAR functioned as an exemplifying case.

Research as dialogue

This project is situated in the multifaceted tradition of action research, or participatory action research. Despite the great diversity of approaches found under this umbrella, I will use PAR in a general way to indicate research that pursues social change as a major aim of knowledge production and that occurs in co-production with participants from the field under study.

In PAR, authority over and execution of research are shared between professional researchers and participants, who learn methods of scientific knowledge production and use the process to understand their own reality (Greenwood et al., 1993). Often the envisaged social change is understood specifically as the improvement of the participants’ situation, that is, ‘local change’. Local change is embodied in the process of research itself, since knowledge production develops through a process of change and reflection. The PAR tradition considers the validity of the knowledge produced as dependent on whether that knowledge increases participant’s understanding and control over their own situation (Greenwood and Levin, 2007: 78).

However, the involvement of participants is not only dictated by the goal of local change. PAR also aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge and is based on the idea that the *right* to actively contribute to knowledge production and the *ability* to do so are not confined to the world of professional (academic) researchers. Advocates of PAR claim that the ‘expert model’ of scientific production, where the final authority over research is concentrated in the hands of a professional researcher, ignores participants’ expertise and knowledge, both of which could prove invaluable for producing relevant results (Jordan, 2003: 190). Therefore PAR research employs co-generation of knowledge, where perspectives and choices leading the research process come from different angles and are shared between participants. The PAR perspective is connected to a critique of the

established system of knowledge production and its power distribution, that was first developed in social studies of science and technology. Extending the range of who participates in knowledge production also means shifting power relations in society, including the power to determine what knowledge is useful (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2008; Rahman, 1991).

The most significant challenge for PAR researchers concerns their actual ability to transcend the local level. The production of supra-local knowledge is, in practice, often eclipsed by the aim of local change (Park, 1999, 2006). Many experiences with PAR indicate that it is hard to combine local change with empirical and theoretical innovation due to practical limits: the role of the researcher often boils down to that of a coach involved in difficult mediation processes, who, engulfed in the developmental projects her research entails, rarely manages to transcend the practical level (Svensson et al., 2007). Critics of the PAR tradition have therefore claimed that it ‘empowers citizens but might disempower the academy’ (Evans and Kotchetkova, 2009). Concerns regarding the inability of PAR to contribute to scientific knowledge touch at the heart of the PAR program and its democratic ideals. Indeed, the crystallizing distinction between, on the one side, PAR as a local, democratic and practice-oriented type of research, and, on the other side, conventional research as scientific and theoretically informed knowledge production, sidesteps the ideal of making the production of socio-scientific knowledge accessible to actors who are normally excluded.

Recently, Scandinavian researchers have sought to counterbalance the practical-development bias of PAR, by conducting participatory research that is less centred on the direct involvement of the researcher in the development process and more focused on the co-production of theoretically informed knowledge (Åkerström and Brunnberg, 2013; Svensson et al., 2007). In this *interactive research* style, the knowledge produced still has high social relevance, but that relevance transcends the lives or practices of the participants. Thus, in contrast to PAR, interactive research will not necessarily result in a direct change of the participants’ situation (see for example Åkerström and Brunnberg, 2013).

The project presented here takes on both challenges – involving participants in a change process resulting directly from PAR, but also employing PAR to contribute to the production of knowledge relevant beyond the lives of participants and disclosing perspectives about the issue under study that were previously difficult to articulate. These challenges were met by using the participatory research as a ‘window of understanding’ in the broader research. I use this expression to convey that the PAR opened up the space to deepen the understanding of the research subject, by letting participants’ knowledge and perspective play a part in the analysis of research material of the broader research of which their situation formed a specific case. This broader research, called *Disclosing Cooperation*, focused on cooperation between volunteer immigrant organisations and state services offering parenting support to families in Amsterdam (see the next section). The PAR project, called Youth and Family Centre (YFC) on the Spot, zoomed in on one specific case of cooperation between two immigrant organizations and one YFC (municipal service offering also parenting support), to understand on which assumptions the cooperative ties were based, what were mutual expectations and how the cooperation could be reinforced. Apart from YFC on the Spot, Disclosing Cooperation did not have a participatory character in its main set up. Through the interaction between these two levels of knowledge production, the perspectives of participants played an important role in the analysis of difficulties and challenges encountered in the cooperative

effort between immigrant organizations and Amsterdam's statutory services, considered in Disclosing Cooperation.

In this setting, participatory strategies were applied to a discourse analytic inquiry aimed at understanding participants' visions and ideals regarding inter-organizational cooperation. Participants produced narratives about cooperation and the aims they hoped to achieve, which the researcher analysed through dialogues with them. The analysis of the discursive structures that inform the views and the experiences of actors/participants became in this process a basis for 'coscientization' (Freire, 1970). Referring to Freire's legacy, Greenwood and Levin (2007: 64) use this term to indicate 'an inquiry process aimed at shaping knowledge relevant to action, built on a critical understanding of historical and political contexts within which participants act'. For YFC on the Spot, the goal was to construct a shared interpretation of cooperation that could valorize and connect participants' ideals and knowledge. To facilitate engagement of and transition between different types of knowledge (see Heron and Reason, 2006, 2008), I developed the idea of 'cycles of interpretation' – a series of alternating translations of statements or descriptions in which participants and researcher rephrase each other's knowledge to develop a common understanding.

Cooperation in the field of parenting support in the multi-ethnic city

Australia, the United States, and many countries in Europe have recently increased investments in programs aimed at strengthening parents' pedagogical skills (Churchill and Clarke, 2010; Shulruf et al., 2009). However, engaging parents in these programs is not always easy (Axford et al., 2012). Increasing the involvement of immigrant families is of particular concern in the Netherlands. Over the last decade immigrant youth have been the focus of policy discussions because they tend to be underrepresented in preventive support programs and overrepresented in heavier interventions directed at severe problems. Immigrant parents appear to face more and different difficulties and insecurities than do native parents (Bertrand et al., 1998; Pels and Distelbrink, 2000; Pool et al., 2005). They are also less likely to use statutory services, turning instead to smaller and more informal support settings within their own communities (Bouwmeester et al., 1998; Van den Broek et al., 2010). Immigrants' low engagement with statutory youth services has also been seen in other countries (Križ and Skivenes, 2012; Skokauskas et al., 2010).

To address this issue the former Dutch Ministry of Youth and Families launched the research and development program Diversity in Youth Policy (2007–2013), which focused on statutory services' recruitment and retention of immigrant clients. The program aimed to reduce the problems encountered by immigrant youth by providing more immigrant families with light, 'preventive' parenting support and offering specialized services that better respond to the specific needs of those families. Building connections between statutory services and volunteer immigrant organizations was seen as an important step towards broadening the reach of statutory services within immigrant communities. One project that sprang from this program was the Kenniswerkplaats-Tienplus: a large collaboration of research institutes, academies, local policymakers, professionals and civil society organisations, whose goal is to improve immigrants' access to parenting support services by developing relevant knowledge at the interface of practice and research.

The research Disclosing Cooperation was conducted within the Kenniswerkplaats-Tienplus, between April 2010 and December 2012. It involved an analysis of the relation between the between volunteer immigrant organizations and statutory services in different districts of Amsterdam, by means of interviews, focus groups and observations involving twenty different organizations. Instances of successful cooperation appeared to be rare. Through analysing the experiences of volunteers active in immigrant organisations and professionals and managers from statutory services that had attempted to work together, the study aimed at identifying the main obstacles to and chances for the emergence of cooperation. The study focused on the actor's different conceptualization of cooperation and the respective roles. It employed frame analysis, which studies systems of meaning used by actors to interpret reality, to examine the role that different frames played in shaping interaction between volunteers and professional parenting counsellors.

The developmental aim of the research was providing people with tools for becoming conscious of the frame divergence (understanding one's own frame in relation to the other's). At the same time the research was, if possible, to help reframing the issue of cooperation between immigrant organisations and statutory services into a shared image, that could serve as a basis for the development of stable cooperative ties. This latter aim was especially embodied in the PAR.

Participatory research in Amsterdam Nieuw-West: YFC on the Spot

The PAR examined one instance of actual cooperation, namely that between one YFC in Amsterdam and two grassroots volunteer immigrant organizations that emerged within the Moroccan community in the same neighbourhood as the YFC. It involved a collective investigation into the participants' own conceptualization of cooperation in relation to that of other participants and in relation to dominant discursive structures. This collective investigation offered the opportunity to develop a shared understanding of cooperation and its goals, and, at the same time, produced useful data for the larger project Disclosing Cooperation.

In the Netherlands, YFCs are the primary public institutions charged with the care of children and parents, including both health care and parenting support. The volunteer organizations were set up by citizens concerned with the wellbeing of their community. They contribute to the social participation and education of immigrants living in the neighbourhood and help those who experience difficulties adapting to life in the Netherlands but are hesitant to use Dutch formal institutions. The first organization, SSOP,²¹ is primarily concerned with families from the Moroccan community (the largest in the neighbourhood); the second, Nisa for Nisa, is a Moroccan women's organization that also reaches women of other ethnicities.

At the start of the study, cooperation between the parties had just begun. The YFC had been offering parenting support courses and individual counselling sessions at the offices of the immigrant organizations for only a few months. Core members of the volunteer organizations played a big role in recruiting parents from their own community for the courses and counselling. These parents belonged to a group the YFC considered 'hard to reach' but which at the same time appeared to face substantial difficulties. In turn, the YFC provided a professional parenting counsellor of Moroccan

²¹ Stichting Steunpunt Ondersteuning en Participatie.

heritage, who could communicate with parents in their own language. Core members of the immigrant organizations and the management and professionals of the YFC were participants in the study. Through this research, participants hoped to reinforce the (still fragile) cooperative relationship and to make the advantages of their cooperative project visible and explicit for the outside world (especially for the municipality and other immigrant organizations in the district). The project involved three different phases in which participants' views on the aims and future of cooperation and on each organization's roles were analysed and eventually forged into a new, shared narrative of cooperation, which the participants and I (the researcher) promoted and disseminated together.

In the following, I will describe how the project developed and show how the research contributed both to local level changes and to a broader analysis of the relation between municipal parenting support services and volunteer immigrant organizations that transcends the local level.

Aim and structure of YFC on the Spot

This one-year study developed through three phases: explorative, critical-reflective and constructive. While the first two phases involved a preliminary and more profound study of the views and experiences of participants, the third phase concerned the interpretation of results of the first phases, through producing a shared understanding of these results. Though my focus here is on the research process, I will briefly describe some results of the inquiry – in separate boxes – as an illustration. This methodological account is not the result of the participatory process and should be understood as my own perspective as academic researcher.

The research participants were three members of SSOP (chairman and two most active volunteers), two representatives from Nisa for Nisa (chairwoman and treasurer) and three YFC employees (director and parenting support manager, and a professional parenting counsellor who ran courses and counselling sessions at the immigrant organizations). In addition to these core participants, other volunteers from the immigrant organizations occasionally attended plenary meetings, which sometimes had up to 15 participants.

Phase one: explorative

To get a first impression of participants' perceptions and wishes, I held semi-structured interviews with individual participants. The core questions concerned participants' views of the parenting support needs in the community, the motives for participation in the PAR, the importance and value of the cooperation, the roles of all parties therein and the future of the cooperation. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for use in my own provisional analysis of the participants' perspectives (see Box 1 for an example); this analysis was later shared with participants, who commented on it.

Participants differed in their perceptions of each other's roles, which indicated that tacit assumptions on the meaning of reciprocal behaviour could diverge. For instance, volunteers from immigrant organizations saw the cooperation as a site of mutual learning, while YFC professionals did not. Volunteers considered themselves 'experts' who understood the parents' cultural context and defined their role as 'guides' who could help the professionals adapt their services appropriately. These roles were not recognized by YFC professionals, who thought volunteers did not have relevant expertise concerning the *content* of YFC services. They referred to volunteers as facilitators, who would mostly ensure that a minimum number of parents attended the courses or counselling sessions and, by their own presence, would encourage others to trust the YFC professionals.

Box 1: Differences in role perception emerging from phase one

Phase two: critical-reflective

The participatory stage of the investigation started with the second phase, which consisted of five meetings attended by all core participants. These meetings were set up as plenary discussions to allow for a broad dialogue and joint reflection on a number of themes; they were also recorded and transcribed for preliminary analysis. The outcomes of the interviews from phase one were the discussion topic in the first meeting, after which the meetings had a progressive character: the results of each meeting provided input for the next. Additional input was provided by some provisional results of the larger research *Disclosing Cooperation*, which were progressively shared with participants. Parallel to the meetings, the research progress was discussed in numerous informal contacts between participants and between (individual) participants and myself. I reported these discussions in field notes.

Phase two began by delineating the definitive aim of the project. The initial idea of analysing the cooperation on strong and weak aspects was substituted on the basis of the outcomes of phase one, which had shown that the views on cooperation of participants diverged. The new goal on which the research team agreed was to create a strong, shared understanding of the cooperation, founded in the experiences, missions and wishes of both the YFC and the immigrant organizations. The motives of participants for engaging in the PAR that appeared from the interviews suggested the need of a strong shared perspective that, next to reinforcing the cooperation itself, would help to convince other parties (other migrant organizations in the district, but also the municipality) about the crucial importance of it. All participants appeared conscious of the fact that their cooperation was an exception in a context in which the relation between the professional field and the voluntary field appeared hardened with mutual distrust. During phase two participants became progressively interested in the different ways in which other participants framed cooperation. At the end, they worked towards building one shared narrative that, in a later phase, they could present to a larger audience.

Phase three: constructive

In phase three, the participants were actively involved in developing the shared narrative about their cooperation. This was documented in a report that was published by the Kenniswerkplaats. We further decided to convey their story (result of the PAR) through a short documentary film,

the making of which provided an occasion for new individual interviews and discussions. The film was screened at a conference which was attended by local policymakers as well as other immigrant organizations and YFCs active in West Amsterdam. After the conference, participants were regularly asked to tell their story at other meetings and conferences. In addition, the researcher continued to meet informally with participants and to visit the immigrant organizations and the YFC; thus, discussion about the research results and the impact of the shared story in the outside world continued for a considerable time.

The professional researcher in cooperation with participants

The project was an instance of a co-generative inquiry, in which ‘all participants work together in an inquiry group as co-researchers and co-subjects’ (Heron and Reason, 2008: 366). Participants’ stories and discussions provided the data, and they were also involved in analysing those data. Furthermore, participants had an important role in helping me to formulate the core questions, based on previous results, that guided meeting discussions. However, the role of the participants as ‘researchers’ differed from that of myself as professional researcher. I had a more extensive role in organizing material and conducting a first analysis. Nevertheless, participants’ contributions to the analysis significantly added to the study’s conclusions.

My role as professional researcher was threefold: (1) *Moderator*: Chairing all discussions, ensuring that all participants could contribute equally. (2) *Preliminary analysis*: Every meeting started with my own draft analysis of the previous meeting, which the group then discussed and modified. (3) *Managing the flow of knowledge between studies*: I shared the framework and some preliminary findings of the larger research project, Disclosing Cooperation, which involved many other immigrant organizations and statutory parenting support services in Amsterdam. The participants provided comments and critiques and connected their experiences, where possible, with those results. They were free to disagree with my interpretations. In addition, I introduced theoretical concepts, such as *safe spaces* (discussed below), to help participants contextualize their ideas and convey them in a richer and more articulate fashion. Conversely, I used the co-generative analysis of the PAR to inform my own understanding of the collection and interpretation of Disclosing Cooperation data.

Making space for the ‘unheard’

From the beginning, the most important challenge faced by the research collaborative was finding a form of discussion to which all participants could meaningfully contribute. Making space for the input of immigrant organizations turned out to be more difficult than the collaborative initially thought it would be. This was not because immigrant participants were unresponsive or refrained from participating. On the contrary! They enthusiastically engaged in discussions and sometimes overflowed with stories and anecdotes. But at first, YFC participants, and partly also I as researcher, thought their stories ‘missed the point’ or were difficult to place in context. Indeed, at one point, the YFC manager confessed to being surprised by the ‘low level’ of immigrant participants and wondered whether a joint research project could actually succeed.

During the research process we progressively realised that the perception that immigrant participants were not adequately ‘attuned’ to the modus of discussion was connected with a difference between our frames of reference and with a difference in our discursive positioning. For

myself, this realisation occurred through alternating interaction (both in the meetings and through individual contacts) with immigrant participants with home analysis. Taking time appeared crucial to learn to understand contributions in the form of anecdotes and images which first appeared out of context. For instance, playing back interviews at home, connections started to appear between observations and experiences of immigrant participants and the views of pedagogic theories that shape new policy approaches to pedagogic support to families. These theories emphasize the importance of normative discussions between citizens about parenting and the role of community development to help parents articulate their own orientation, difficulties and need for change (De Winter, 2012). By further connecting participant's stories with this literature, in dialogue with the team, new interpretations of the role of immigrant organizations in parenting support were possible. These interpretations contrasted with the view of this role that is dominant in the field of professional parenting support and policy discourse, which was adopted automatically as a standard frame of reference by both YFC participants and myself. This view is centered on linking parents to professionals who can provide them with parenting tools.

YFC participants' expressed the standard policy discourse about immigrant organizations 'forming a bridge' to immigrant parents, using common concepts and slogans that were familiar to all participants. Although immigrant participants sometimes employed the same slogans, they actually told a different story. They related concrete and detailed accounts of experiences or observations, concerning the needs of parents and their own role in providing parenting support in their community, that were hard to fit within the standard YFC framework.²² Their contributions did not have the form of abstract and general ideas (propositional knowledge), but mostly that of stories and anecdotes. Since the YFC framework was dominant in the discussions (at least in the first two meetings), the immigrant participants' descriptions appeared often unconnected to the discussion and functioned as disruptions of the discursive order. By focussing on this phenomenon and taking it seriously, we realized that there was an asymmetry in the possibility of participants to contribute to the discussion, as immigrant participants seemed to lack a standard discourse that could position their experiences in a shared and recognisable system of meaning.

Through several cycles of interpretation, the group worked together to rephrase such contributions until the speaker felt their point had been clearly articulated, and all other participants felt they clearly understood; in this way, seemingly incongruous statements could positively influence the direction of the discussion. Through the cycles of interpretation, the contributions of immigrant participants that initially appeared less articulate were disclosed and translated in propositional knowledge. A new discourse became 'hearable', in which the role of immigrant organisations in parenting support was framed differently. This was crucial for articulating the distinction between two main frames, which played a major role in analysing material also of the larger research *Disclosing Cooperation*: The dominant frame just mentioned (later called the *Frame of Access*) and the frame of immigrant participants and other respondents in the larger research (later called the *Frame of shared spaces*). (See Box 3).

²² See the section 'Windows of understanding: Broadening access to knowledge production' for a further description of the different conceptualizations of cooperation between YFC participants and immigrant participants.

As a first step in a cycle of interpretation, I would develop a provisional interpretation during my analysis sessions at home. Participants would then discuss and elaborate that interpretation during the next meeting. Box 2 provides an example of this dynamic. In this example, a ‘mismatched’ observation from an immigrant participant initially functioned as a disruption of the discussion. However, it eventually led to a change in the character of the discussion, which moved from being purely instrumental (a search for strategies to increase the visibility and attractiveness of YFC courses) to focusing on the underlying relation between parents’ needs and YFC services, and on the different assumptions held by immigrant and YFC participants. This led to a deeper discussion about the dominant negative image of immigrant parenthood in Dutch society and the roles of immigrant organizations and the YFC within this context.

Second meeting: Initial discussion theme (formulated by YFC participants). How can we increase immigrant parents’ interest in YFC courses? The group discusses and evaluates various strategies for increasing visibility, such as making flyers, talking to individual parents and conveying a positive image of the YFC.

Disruption in the discussion. In the middle of the discussion about these strategies, M (participant from SSOP), starts describing in detail how enthusiastic parents are about the SSOP’s homework support classes. M’s story is taken as nothing more than a colourful intermezzo by the group, since YFC parenting support services and the research’s focus have nothing to do with homework support for children.

Home analysis: Reinterpretation by the researcher. Playing back the discussion, I try to describe M’s contribution in different terms. His story becomes, in my reinterpretation, an illustration of a more general statement, which I attempt to convey in the following terms: ‘The eagerness of parents to make use of homework support services indicates a specific need that is connected to the parenting relationship itself. In discussing how to increase parents’ use of the YFC, we should also focus on signals of what may be latent needs of parents. The needs and insecurities of parents from these groups are not yet sufficiently articulated to link them to YFC offerings.’

Third meeting: Reinterpretation by M based on researcher’s interpretation. M appears very pleased with my reinterpretation and adds: ‘Parents think you need to be a professor to help children with homework. They are very insecure in the school environment and feel they are not able to help their children. They do not consider that providing a pleasant atmosphere at home, establishing routines for homework and talking about school with their kids are effective things they can do.’ M also adds: ‘I tell parents all the time what they are doing right, not what they are doing wrong. In the media and in politics, Moroccan parents, especially those living in this neighbourhood, are portrayed as incapable of good parenting. Before they can help each other, they must feel that they are good parents.’

The YFC manager connects M’s reinterpretation to the expertise available at the YFC. ‘How can parents provide structure? How can parents build relationships with their children and show commitment to them? These are fundamental parenting questions that emerge from your comments.’

Reinterpretation by the group (as summarised jointly on a blackboard). YFC parenting expertise can be helpful in combatting feelings of insecurity that are evident from parents’ behaviour (such as jumping en masse on homework support). However, this insecurity should also be a starting point of our analysis since it is at the foundation of the (fragile) relationship between the YFC and the neighbourhood. The fear of being judged as incompetent parents will make it difficult to accept suggestions from YFC professionals.

Home analysis: Researcher’s reinterpretation of the group’s conclusions. A merely logistical discussion of the possible strategies for increasing parent interest in YFC courses avoids a more important discussion of the existing tensions between the YFC’s envisaged role in the neighbourhood and the experiences of immigrant organizations within their community. Understanding this tension requires reflecting, not just on the ethnocultural characteristics of the Moroccan community within the neighbourhood, but also, more

broadly, on the social position of Moroccan families in the Netherlands and how it affects their relationship with institutionalized parenting support. Participants from immigrant organizations sense that the dominant negative image of immigrants in the Netherlands, especially of Moroccan youth and parenting, places these parents in a tenuous position and induces a feeling of powerlessness that undermines the foundation of social trust and positive self-perception needed to accept feedback and help. Combatting this feeling of powerlessness is the first step to making YFC expertise accessible to immigrant parents.

All participants approved the researcher's final reinterpretation. This cycle of interpretations led to the concepts of safe spaces and the living room effect, which became central parts of the shared narrative.

Box 2: Example of the 'cycles of interpretation' (from phase two fieldnotes)

The passage from not being able to place immigrant participant's stories, to connecting to them was paired, for me as researcher, to a critical reflection on the starting frame of reference I adopted, embedded in the Kenniswerplaats approach (see chapter 3). I shared these reflections and the distinctions I perceived progressively with participants. The distinction between the different frames became clear gradually for participants, as it helped to clarify interventions and solve misunderstandings. Participants did react to my interpretations by completing them and sometimes changing them. The final results of the PAR (the shared story we built together) were expressed in a fashion that all participants recognised as accurate. The fact that the new distinctions made communication easier functioned as the most important confirmation of its validity in terms of PAR standards.

Windows of understanding: broadening access to knowledge production

The PAR project's contribution to the production of supra-local knowledge involved the specific dynamic between two contexts of knowledge production: the context of the PAR project (local), and the wider context of Disclosing Cooperation (supralocal²³). Central to this dynamic was the ongoing interchange between participants' experiences, their evolving understanding through the PAR and the insights that were simultaneously emerging through analysis of the larger research project. During group discussions I regularly quoted respondents from the citywide research (participants from other immigrant organizations and YFCs) and asked PAR participants whether and how the comments of others connected to or clarified their own thoughts. They also discussed my preliminary conclusions of the broader research. This process generated new insights into my own interpretations and functioned as an endorsement of the proceeding analysis in the larger research project. New analyses concerning the tensions between statutory services and immigrant organizations became directly embodied in the experiences of PAR participants and were often clarified with co-produced metaphors. In this sense the PAR project functioned as a 'window' into a deeper understanding of the overall data; the emerging knowledge became co-produced and its

²³ The outcomes of Disclosing Cooperation are 'supralocal' in the sense that (1) they concerned the relationships between immigrant organizations and statutory services in Amsterdam – a broader issue in which YFC on the Spot is one specific case; and (2) they generated socially and scientifically relevant insights concerning the role of immigrant organizations in Dutch social policy and the potential of frame analysis to improve the relationship between volunteer and municipal services (see chapter 2 and 3).

usefulness could be tested. In addition, the clarifying potential worked in both directions simultaneously – supra-local to local as well as local to supra-local.

This bidirectionality is seen most clearly in one of the core findings of Disclosing Cooperation, namely, the existence of a frame conflict between the different ways cooperation is viewed by community and municipal organizations (see chapter 3). The conflicting frames, which I have called *frame of access* and *frame of shared spaces*, are briefly described in Box 3.

<p>Frame of Access</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Dominant in the professional field of parenting support. ○ Emphasizes barriers to professional counselling and coaching of (individual) parents in need of support. <p>Nature of cooperation with immigrant organizations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Reinforces statutory system of parenting support by providing a bridge to parents who need support but are difficult to reach. ○ Professionals should provide clear and complete information about their services. ○ Immigrant volunteers guide parents towards professional help or counselling. ○ Roles and competencies are clearly defined. 	<p>Frame of Shared Spaces</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Dominant in the field of immigrant organizations. ○ Emphasizes spaces for empowerment where community members are helped to get more grip on their position in society (including their role as parents) as well as existing difficulties and possibilities for change. <p>Nature of cooperation with statutory institutions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provides opportunities for a connection and mutual learning between the statutory system and the positive work done within immigrant organisations. The latter concerns especially the reflection on parenting issues with parents that feel distanced from Dutch society and the informal support provided within immigrant organisations. ○ Immigrant organizations provide <i>safe spaces</i> for parents to formulate their own parenting questions, which will not necessarily be those expected by professionals. ○ Immigrant volunteers guide professionals to enter <i>safe spaces</i>. ○ Learning about each other and shaping new forms of support is done together.
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Box 3: Two frames for understanding cooperation

The idea to view tensions between immigrant organizations and statutory services in terms of frame divergence (through frame analysis) stemmed from the initial dynamics encountered in YFC on the Spot. The redefining of the PAR's aim, in phase two, stressed the importance of explicating different perspectives on cooperation. In addition, during the reinterpreting process, connections

started to appear between participants' stories and specific pedagogic-support models recently developed by Dutch scholars and policy advisors. These insights led to an extensive use of frame analysis in *Disclosing Cooperation*. In that study, the frame of access was clearly dominant in stories from statutory service and policy professionals. However, recent policy developments concerning family support are promoting a shift away from the frame of access, towards a frame that has many points in common with the frame of shared spaces, with its focus on 'people's own power' and on the importance of valuing the potential of informal support. An interesting outcome of the analysis in *Disclosing Cooperation*, which also proved of great importance for the reflection in the PAR, was that, despite this shift, the frame of access still seems to persist in the policy discourse when immigrant organizations are concerned (see chapter 2).

The process of unravelling the frames benefitted greatly from regular dialogue with PAR participants. YFC participants reflected on their use of the frame of access to characterize their cooperation with immigrant organizations. Articulating the frame of shared spaces, for which discussions with the PAR group was especially important, helped them to value it as a meaningful framework for understanding immigrants' ambitions in their neighbourhood. The reconceptualization of the role of immigrant organizations that took place during the PAR even affected the initial research question of the larger project. The framework provided by the government's program *Diversity in Youth Policy* centred on the question of how access to existing parenting support services can be improved for immigrant groups.²⁴ The PAR research recontextualized this starting point, making it only one possible way to look at cooperation. Although increasing usage of their own support services is a natural goal of statutory institutions, it is not necessarily the primary objective for immigrant organizations. As the chairwoman of Nisa for Nisa stated, 'Professional institutes have expertise that they can make available to strengthen the work that we do in the neighbourhood. We are the informal support that you want to strengthen'.²⁵ Central to this vision was the co-generated idea of immigrant organizations as safe spaces and the related concept of the living room effect (see Box 4).

The notion of *safe spaces* comes from African-American feminist literature and indicates social spaces in which people find strength in each other to counter negative representations of their identity that are dominant in society, and to impose a positive discourse of the self into the negative societal discourse. Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) examples of safe spaces available for black American women were jazz music, black women's writing, and the personal relations between mothers, daughters and other close women who can create positive self-images with and for each other (see also Janssens and Steyaerd, 2001).

The concept of *safe spaces*, introduced through the cycles of interpretation, became central in the shared narrative that was co-generated by PAR participants. This concept was linked to the idea of the *living room*, which became increasingly important in participants' definition of the space inside the immigrant organizations. The living room is a space for informal and open encounters, which is experienced by members of the community as a 'place for ourselves'. This space became central to the definition of the role of immigrant organizations that provide parenting support, even more so than the formal activities that they organize. By denoting the organizations as *safe spaces*, our conceptualization of that space could include the ideas that (1) the negative image of Moroccan parents in society compromises their relationship with institutional parenting support (see Box 2); and (2) in order to formulate parenting questions that they see

²⁴ Source: <http://www.zonmw.nl/nl/programmas/programma-detail/diversiteit-in-het-jeugdbeleid/algemeen/>.

²⁵ Chairwoman of Nisa for Nisa. Quote from a meeting with municipal policymakers held in April 2013.

as ‘their own’, parents need a space that is sheltered from the discursive field in which they feel powerless. The immigrant organization as *safe space* becomes the site in which parents can recognize difficulties and express doubts concerning parenting questions.

Box 4: Theoretical deepening: the concept of ‘safe spaces’

Producing local change

During the PAR process, participants’ views became noticeably attuned. The use of newly coined expressions and concepts to describe the aims of cooperation and reciprocal roles was evidence that a new, shared narrative was being created. In this narrative the original understanding of immigrant participants, which had gradually become articulated in propositional statements, was rather dominant.²⁶ In the end, YFC participants not only understood the view of immigrant organizations and the meaning of their contributions but had also partly adopted those views, although they did not always appear conscious of the fact that they had changed perspective. This shift is clearly visible when comparing their interview responses in phase one with their later contributions to the documentary. As one example, in the first interview the professional parenting counsellor characterized the informal sphere within the immigrant organizations as an obstacle that made giving the courses there – instead of at the YFC – a time-consuming exercise. During the film interview, she instead talked of the informal relationships between the parents as a positive foundation for providing support in a context of trust. Similarly, in the final narrative the YFC’s definition of the volunteers’ role in the cooperation was broadened to focus attention on their ability to create safe spaces and to introduce professionals into these spaces.

In official presentations and talks that participants gave on the subject of this research in phase three, YFC and immigrant participants were able to easily connect each other’s stories and complement their descriptions, with a confidence and enthusiasm that replaced the hesitation and tentative attitude participants had shown towards each other at the start of the research. New ideas arose, such as organizing an afternoon coffee at the YFC for mothers frequenting the immigrant organizations, which were grounded in a common understanding of the need to create *safe space* conditions within the YFC.

Another important local change was the awareness of the discursive positioning of immigrant participants. The connection with new policy discourses on activation and ‘acting by one’s own power’ had an empowering effect because participants could label their own work and their specific ambitions within their organizations with generally well-known terms. In creating a new narrative, we used concepts from this policy discourse to give resonance to the views of immigrant organizations. In this way, immigrant participants became aware that, to transcend the frame of access, it would also be necessary to transcend a discourse focused primarily on immigrants and integration; instead, they must position themselves within the discourse on the role of the civil society in the pedagogic infrastructure of the city. Connecting their work with the new policy discourse thus, was not just a stratagem to catch the attention of (local) politicians; it became, more

²⁶ This narrative is described in Ponzoni 2012.

profoundly, a way of claiming their identity in civil society (see chapter 2). In this sense, the process yielded a form of ‘coscientization’ (Greenwood and Levin, 2007).

Conclusion

By including participatory components as ‘windows of understanding’ in mainstream qualitative research, this project illustrates one way in which producing local change can be pragmatically and realistically combined with opening up research and knowledge production to previously excluded perspectives. The project can be seen as a response to the critique that PAR’s focus on local change impairs its ability to contribute to the existent body of knowledge, because it merged PAR’s focus on fuelling change through engaging participants in reflection on their own practice and in framing future action, with interactive research’s capacity to employ co-generative knowledge to produce socially and scientifically relevant knowledge. The researcher’s role was more extended than in a classical PAR, when it comes to data collection and analysis. However, the participant’s contributions to the analysis and their having a say in making choices regarding data structuring and interpretation were determinant in the study’s conclusions. This is true, not only for the local conclusions of the case study, YFC on the Spot, itself, but also for the PAR’s role as a ‘window of understanding’, which was fundamental in developing the analysis of the citywide, non-participatory research, Disclosing Cooperation. This latter research was a source for academic articles (concerning the contribution of immigrant organizations to Dutch society and the future of cooperation between these organizations and statutory services) as well as for practice-oriented reports. The production of supra-local knowledge and academic reflection was thereby opened wide to voices that do not normally enter this process easily.

As we found during the PAR, truly giving access to new voices can be challenging. Crucial in this process was the recognition of the asymmetry between the contributions of participants from the two fields (the professional field and that of volunteer immigrant organizations). Where professionals could employ a shared, familiar discourse about the envisaged relationship between statutory services and immigrant organizations, volunteers appeared to lack a standard discourse that could position their experiences and views in an organic and recognizable system of meaning. Consequently, they first appeared ‘unable to speak’, as it were, and their contributions to discussions frequently had the effect of ‘disruptions’. We tackled this issue with the methodological strategy I called ‘cycles of interpretation’, which was based on researcher and participants alternately providing reinterpretations of each other’s descriptions until an agreed upon understanding was reached. A relevant insight the research provided on this matter was that immigrant participants belong to a group of actors whose interests and values are not yet fully articulated in the available social discourses on cooperation in the pedagogic field. Only after recognizing this unequal positioning of participants in the discursive field did it become possible to weave different perspectives into a shared story. The degree of reflexivity of co-generative process was determinant for its critical potential (cfr. Svensson et al., 2007: 241).

The renewed possibility to appreciate the contributions of previously unheard participants became an instance of countering the dominant discourse of integration that defines the social role of immigrant organizations only in terms of connecting immigrants with Dutch institutions (see chapter 2). This form of coscientization in participants mirrored a process of critical self-reflection

for the researcher, who ended up questioning some of the starting points of the broader research project; it thus had a strong impact on the overall analysis. But even more importantly, the findings of the broader research that were shaped in this interactive fashion, also influenced the local analysis. From a PAR point of view, this latter fact increases the validity of the findings – they proved their usefulness by clarifying participants' experiences (Greenwood and Levin, 2007). By the project's end, participants had achieved (1) a greater awareness of their position in the discursive context; (2) new linguistic tools to talk about and promote their perspective in the field of parenting support; and (3) a common narrative that reinforces cooperation.

This experience suggests that co-generative research that makes use of different kinds of expertise and participant knowledge may require directed efforts at reshaping these forms of knowledge into a more usable mode. Such efforts require a substantial time investment. In this study, because the research also aimed at local development, the participants were committed to the process; it is likely that they would not have participated as intensively in a pure form of interactive research that did not have local change as a goal. Securing engagement remains a main challenge in participatory inquiries (see also Braye and McDonnell 2012) and often depends on a connection between the personal aims of participants, their abilities and the research set up (Greenwood et al.1993). In this case, attaining a productive combination between local development and supralocal knowledge production was facilitated by the fact that the developmental aim had a reflective character, which was directed at a deeper understanding and expression of the participants' cooperative ties instead of towards a future action plan. A translation of this methodology for more practically oriented cases might prove more challenging. However, further experimentation with employing PAR as 'window of understanding' in mainstream research is worth the challenge. It may provide a path for the improved transfer of knowledge from local contexts to a shared body of knowledge, and back.

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